



Vivian Maier The Color Work

Colin Westerbeck

FOREWORD BY Joel Meyerowitz

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Self-portrait, location and date unknown.



Chicago, 1962.

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Foreword

One of photography's truths is that the best street photographers learn to be invisible or, at the very least, to convince themselves that they are. Over the years, I've walked the streets with Henri Cartier-Bresson, Garry Winogrand, Tony Ray-Jones, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, Tod Papageorge, and some of today's younger shooters—Gus Powell, Melanie Einzig, Ben Ingham, and Matt Stuart—and we have all developed our own sleight-of-hand street act. We dodge, feint, twirl, two-step, and eye-shift our way through crowds and rallies, along avenues and backstreets, in parks and on beaches, anywhere that ordinary life draws our attention and desire. It is our invisibility that helps us get away with stealing fire from the gods.

In 2009, into the well-established history of street photography flashed the unexpected comet of Vivian Maier. In October of that year I received an email from John Maloof, a young artist I didn't know. He introduced himself and told me the story of how he had purchased a cache of negatives, slides, and some prints at a storage-warehouse auction. Knowing my work, as well as *Bystander: The History of Street Photography*, a book I coauthored with Colin Westerbeck, he had decided to write to ask whether I would be kind enough to give him my opinion on Maier's photographs.

Attached to the email were about two hundred color slides made between the late 1950s and mid-1970s, all of which John had scanned. I can't say that my immediate first impression was that they were fantastic, but as I clicked through the unedited raw work I kept getting glimpses of Maier's insights and timing; great, positive attitude; way of framing; courage of her convictions about how close she was willing to go; genuine curiosity; and undeniable, humanistic warmth, irony, and humor, all of which produced an overall sense of a coherent life view. After looking at all the images, I had that delightful sense that comes from seeing inspiring and intelligent work. I went back through the slides, cut them down to forty or fifty, and looked at them again.

Now I could really see the heart in the work. Who was this woman? Was she simply a naïf who sprang whole into midcentury American photography, or had she done her fair share of looking at other work? Before writing back to John, I wrote to Colin: "You have to see this work—an unknown woman just landed in the middle of the history of street photography." There were tender portraits and exquisite moments of frozen action; there were streetscapes and children at play; there were small details and gestures beautifully seen and framed, as well as photographs of the old, the down-and-out, and the lost souls of Chicago and New York. Above all, there was a fierce intelligence weaving its way throughout the color work. All this, in color! How courageous, and how invisible! I was sure she didn't print color, because . . . who did back then? Which meant that the photographs had stayed hidden in boxes and most likely hadn't played a big role in her artistic growth, yet they were—and are now—works of value to us who are alive to see her development.

Look closely at the many self-portraits Vivian Maier made, and you will see her disguises, her cloak of invisibility. She's as plain as an old-fashioned schoolmarm. She's the wallflower, the spinster aunt, the ungainly tourist in the big city . . . except . . . she isn't! She was a professional nanny, which is a great disguise in itself—because how suspicious or dangerous could a woman shepherding a couple of kids possibly be? Her line of work gave her license to be out on the streets, making any image she was interested in. You can see in her photographs that she was a quick study of human behavior, of the unfolding moment, the flash of a gesture, or the mood of a facial expression—brief events that turned the quotidian life of the street into a revelation for her.

However, my sense is that Maier preferred to shoot, and made stronger work, in black-and-white for several reasons. Black-and-white was a faster film to work with, as opposed to early Kodachrome, which was extremely slow and therefore riskier. With black-and-white, she could have prints to hold in her hand and reflect upon, which would put her more in harmony with her instincts. Her heart for the game of sight, the strength and purity of her instinct, and her deep love of photography show up more consistently in black-and-white. It was in this medium that she learned to stand her ground, to move in close to cops and drunks, punks and wise guys, and the old and infirm, yet stay connected and maintain her sense of humor in difficult situations.

But there are memorable gems in Maier's color work, and some terrific observations and characters are to be found in this book. You can see again and again the way color could entice her when a "color incident" emerged out of the flux of daily life. Take, for example, the simple image shown on the cover of this book of a hand holding a pinkie, folded on a red dress in a strangely affecting gesture behind a woman's back—an image as powerful as a nation's flag.

Maier was an early poet of color photography.

—Joel Meyerowitz



Self-portrait, location unknown, 1956.

Introduction

We dance around in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

—Robert Frost, “The Secret Sits,” 1936

Robert Frost’s poem “The Secret Sits” should have been chiseled on Vivian Maier’s tombstone. “I’m the mystery woman,” Maier once told some children she tended during her long career as a nanny. She was indeed the mystery woman, and remained so until a couple of years after she died. When an artist’s fame arrives only postmortem, it puts a special burden on the work itself to tell us who he or she was—especially in this case, when all we have, besides around 140,000 negatives and positives, are the scattered reminiscences of a few people who were not, themselves, in the art world. The one other photographer who immediately comes to mind as having had such posthumous fame, Eugène Atget, is more intimidating than encouraging. Atget was a failed actor who supported himself by making “documents for artists,” as the sign outside his Paris atelier read. Though he died in relative obscurity, his photographic documentation of the city in the early twentieth century is now considered one of the great masterworks in the medium’s history. But before determining whether Maier’s work merits a place in that pantheon, let’s first examine a different art-world context into which her career might fit by analogy.

Two years after World War II ended, three photographers—Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, and David Seymour, who worked under the byline “Chim”—established an invitation-only cooperative for photojournalists, which they called Magnum. The emphasis was not on the star power of the photographers but rather on maintaining a certain quality of work, no matter which member came up in the rotation. Cartier-Bresson was successful at keeping the public’s eye on his photographs rather than his personal life. But Capa, whose death-defying coverage of war and movie-star good looks made him a romantic figure anyway, died in 1954 while photographing in Indochina, after which his life became the sort of legend that often reduced his photographs to mere illustration of his myth.

In 1967, twenty years after the founding of Magnum, another triumvirate of photographers emerged in *New Documents*, an exhibition organized by John Szarkowski, the photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). The three photographers were Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, and Diane Arbus, and their work was a documentation of everyday life rather than the historic epic to which Magnum was dedicated. Again, though, the premature death of one of the three turned her photography into merely the evidence and illustration of her character: in this case, Arbus’s suicide in July 1971 reduced her work to a puzzle in which the photographs are clues to an enigmatic personality. Neither Winogrand nor Friedlander has merited a biography, but in 2016 the third biography of Arbus since her death was published—*Diane Arbus: Portrait of a Photographer*, a definitive work by Arthur Lubow in which 600 pages of text are followed by 150 pages of notes.



Garry Winogrand, *World's Fair, New York, 1964*.

© *The Estate of Garry Winogrand, Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.*

Fast-forward almost forty years, to 2009, when the death of another photographer, who also happened to be a woman, inspired a new cult of personality. Vivian Maier was eighty-three when she died of natural causes. This photographer is a figure of fascination not because she was famous in her lifetime, like Capa or Arbus, but because she was virtually unknown to the public. For that very reason, the effort to try to understand her life by looking at her photographs seems deeply compelling. Maier was not a primitive—someone with a natural talent for photography who created a great body of work in isolation from and ignorance of the art history of her medium—although the extent of her exposure to photography's history remains, like so much else about her, uncertain.

Maier was born in New York in 1926, the second child of an American father, Carl Maier, and a French mother, Marie Jaussaud. Her parents divorced, and in 1932 she and her mother returned to her mother's hometown of Saint-Julien in France's Champsaur valley, near the Swiss border. Six years later, Maier and her peripatetic mother returned to New York, when Maier's deranged older brother, Carl, was released from jail. Carl later died at a New Jersey rest home in 1977, two years after their mother died destitute in New York.



Lee Friedlander, New York City, 1966.

©Lee Friedlander, Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

It was in the midst of more such comings and goings that Maier took up photography. After the war, Maier learned that she had inherited her family's ancestral home in Saint-Julien from her great-aunt, who had died in 1943. Maier returned there in 1950 to sell the place. She was then twenty-four and had been working in a New York doll factory to support herself, but after selling her inheritance she had enough money to do whatever she wanted for a while—and she wanted to take photographs. She stayed in Saint-Julien to extensively document this rural, traditional part of France.

She returned to New York in mid-1951. This was when her acculturation to photographic history seems to have begun in earnest. In 1952, she went to the exhibition *Five French Photographers* at MoMA. Three years later, when Edward Steichen, then MoMA's photography curator, opened his extravaganza exhibition *The Family of Man*, Maier went to it twice, which suggests she was trying to take it all in, to digest as much of the medium's history as she could.

That exhibition was the best-attended photography show MoMA had ever done, and included in it was an image by the photographer who would be the subject of the next-best-attended exhibition in MoMA's history. Where Steichen's blockbuster had been a worldwide survey the 1972 exhibition, *Diane Arbus*, curated by Szarkowski, was a monographic show, a memorial exhibition that opened in the fall of the year after Arbus committed suicide. The Arbus show had more of an impact on photography aficionados than did Steichen's anthology of photojournalism.

Although Maier had left New York for Chicago more than a decade earlier, the exhibition caused such a stir that it's likely she was aware of it. Moreover, even if she couldn't get away to see the exhibition in New York, she had the perfect chance to do so the following spring, as the first stop on the exhibition's tour was the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. There, she would also have had the opportunity to buy the catalog. Aside from just a chance to see Arbus's work, Maier had a compelling personal reason to be interested in the exhibition. Unlike almost all other photographers trying to make pictures of people in public places, Arbus, like Maier, used the twin-lens Rolleiflex camera. Up until about this point in the

early 1970s, the Rollei was Maier's preferred camera, too.

There is some controversy—or perhaps just some confusion—surrounding the personal library on photography Maier is reputed to have assembled. John Maloof, who acquired Maier's photographs at auction and later set up an archive of her work, told me that until nearly the end of her life, whatever books she might have read belonged to her employers, although she bought a few books herself. That account seems to be supported by another report that among the books Maier owned were some volumes of the Life Library of Photography series published in the 1970s. But according to the sister of a child Maier was caring for at the time, in 1990 Maier had “piled her bedroom five feet deep with books, leaving only a narrow path to her bed. Then she covered that—and slept on the floor.” Other sources have likewise testified that she accumulated quite a collection of books over the years.

“My life is in boxes,” Maier announced at one point when she was moving within the Chicago area, apparently referring to boxes and boxes of books, along with other possessions. She took photographs of an overloaded bookcase and, at another address, stacks of books piled up on top of the toilet in her bathroom. The issue won't be resolved until whatever books she did have are exhumed from storage at the Vivian Maier Archive. In the meantime, I'll go on record now saying that when an account of her books is finally available, one of them will turn out to be the slim, paperbound Arbus catalog that Szarkowski published in 1972.

Discrepancies in the accounts of Maier's library are indicative of larger uncertainty about her life story. Nonetheless, two recent publications shed new light: Ann Marks's *Vivian Maier Developed: The Real Story of the Photographer Nanny* and Pamela Bannos's *Vivian Maier: A Photographer's Life and Afterlife*. I owe special thanks to Marks for giving me access to her text before it was officially published. Bannos's book is particularly valuable for its first seven chapters, which give a full account of the first fifty or so years of Maier's life. Chapter eight, “The Missing Picture: Vivian Maier's Last Thirty Years,” is only ten pages long. Those last thirty years—a time when her photography soared as her professional and personal life declined—mark the period when, working with a 35-millimeter camera, Maier made roughly forty thousand Ektachrome color slides. Those photographs tell their own story, and that is the one I intend to trace here—to see how and where Maier fits into the history of photography.



Self-portrait, New York City, December 23, 1954.



Location unknown, October 1976.

One of the few positive influences on Maier's early life was a woman named Emilie Haugmard. Haugmard became Maier's de facto caretaker in 1941, when Maier was fifteen and her mother began a peripatetic life, in effect abandoning her daughter forever. Childcare was Haugmard's profession, so her kindness may have influenced Maier to become a nanny herself. Beginning in 1951, when she returned to New York, Maier's vocation was childcare and her even more consuming avocation was photography. In the 35-millimeter color work that she made from the 1970s through the 1990s, photography of children was one of the two dominant genres that she practiced.

The workaday lesson in life that caring for other people's children provided matured Maier's photography. When she moved to Chicago in 1956, it was to care for the children of well-to-do families. She settled into the upscale, suburban communities of the North Shore, where she went from one family to another, pretty much without interruption, until she was in her seventies. How her attitudes toward the world in which she lived developed, changed, and deepened in this period is reflected primarily in her photography. Aside from what and how she photographed, we have until recently had only scattered memories of and anecdotes about her to go by.

The most whimsical and numerous photographs she made were, understandably, of the children in her care. Because the smallest tykes were squirmy, clumsy, and more likely to injure themselves, she had her strategies for keeping them from harm. One was to be a helicopter nanny, staying so close that her photographs of them seem almost abstract at times. Another was to contain them, to make a game of getting them to hide or play in a basket, a planter, or some other tight space where they could do themselves no harm.

While playful photographs like these were the most numerous, Maier could also take truly transcendent ones (see [here](#)). This 1960 image, for example, shows the gifted photographer's sensitivity to light as a subject equal to or even more important than the nominal subject upon which the light falls. Coming inside, perhaps from an afternoon out playing in the sunshine, the boy seems dazed by the sheer force of the light falling on him. He touches the screen door as if to steady himself. His momentary distraction is the occasion for Maier's concentration, her instantaneous focus of both mind and camera. A

dialectical relationship like this between photographer and subject makes for the best sort of photograph. It creates the paradox inherent in all art.

A few other photographs of children are noteworthy not because they are better than the ones she made of her charges, but because they are of African American children from a different walk of life. Maier began photographing African Americans on a trip she made around the United States in 1958, and she continued to do so on and off for the next thirty years or more. Her photographs of African Americans demonstrate that her view of life was broader than the conservative, suburban environment in which she worked.

Another subject Maier returned to periodically was department-store mannequins, like the photograph of a posed, poised, fashionably dressed female amid undressed children—perhaps an image of a nanny surrounded by her charges—[here](#). This comic photograph may also reflect a darker mood into which she was slipping at the time. Even as her interests as a photographer were expanding and her images were soaring to new artistic heights, her work reflected a decline into obsession in some ways, such as the repeated attraction to certain subjects—naked mannequins with mature female bodies among them.

Such images begin to seem a kind of oblique pornography, related to the more explicitly pornographic subject matter Maier was also photographing. Her fascination with naked female bodies lay somewhere between mere curiosity and obsession. She photographed the marquee of pornographic movie theaters and the reproductions of naked women in pornographic magazines that she found in trash cans. Her attraction to this subject matter may suggest that she was a lesbian, as do the masculine clothes—from her hats to her shoes—she favored. If so, she seems to have kept her sexuality hidden from others, and possibly herself. Hints of it came out only in the one universal language she possessed: her photography.

Maier worked in a variety of genres, from portraiture to architecture to landscape. A picture from 1978 (see [here](#)) that shows architecture's place in the landscape exemplifies how her intuitive genius for her medium led her to an understanding of issues then being explored in theoretical writings on photography—which she was almost certainly not reading. This view of a grand white house with its roof and front yard covered in snow has what the late critic and philosopher Roland Barthes called a *punctum*: the single errant detail in certain photographs that gives them their power. In this case, the punctum is the one spot of warm, yellow lamplight seen beneath the overhang of the front porch in an otherwise blue, cheerless scene. Maier photographed this house from other points of view in other seasons, which suggests it may have been the home of the family she was working for at the time.



Location unknown, 1988.



Allan Sekula, another key commentator on photography, in a sense bridged the gap between Maier and Barthes. A contemporary of both, Sekula was a brilliant photographer as well as one of the most trenchant writers on the medium. When he saw for sale on eBay individual photographs by Maier that John Maloof had acquired at auction, he intervened to inform Maloof that she was a historically important figure whose work should be kept together. When writer Richard Cahan later asked Sekula to expand on his view of Maier's significance, Sekula characterized her as a photographer who "had an open and inclusive and very fundamental idea of what constituted 'America' that was missed by a lot of photographers in the 1950s and '60s." Moreover, Sekula argued, "This may have had to do with her view being that of an outsider, a foreigner. I find myself imagining her as a female Robert Frank, penniless, without a Guggenheim grant, unknown and working as a nanny to get by."

Sekula's characterization of Maier is, for him, uncharacteristically melodramatic. Yet she and Frank, known best for his photography collection *The Americans*, do invite comparison in certain ways. He grew up and received his original training as a photographer in Switzerland, just across the border from the Champsaur valley in France, where Maier spent part of her childhood and where she later made her first photographs. Born only two years before her, Frank was of the same generation. More significantly, he, too, had an acute sensitivity to the place—or rather, the displacement—of African Americans in society.

A color slide Maier made early in her career as a photographer is as poignant an observation of African Americans as any of Frank's studies (see [here](#)). On the curb across the street, waiting in rank formation for the light to change, is a group of white businessmen, while right in front of us, out on the edges of the frame and out of focus, are two young African American women. The blurry, marginalized place these women have in the photograph is an acute commentary on the place black people have had in American society. Other photographs Maier made over the years elaborate on the judgment made in that 1959 image, too (see [below](#) and [here](#)). Black and white people face away from each other with grim expressions, in photographs where it is sometimes the African American who is shrouded in shadow, sometimes the white person. Either way, the lighting is emblematic of race relations in America at the time.

Intermixed with this dark view of American society are more hopeful images of African Americans that Maier took in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She sees that even in a city with a history of racism as ingrained as Chicago's, African Americans have gradually begun to occupy a new position not just in the city's economy but also in its politics (see [here](#)). The poster image the elegantly dressed young woman carries is of Chicago's first African American mayor, Harold Washington. Judging by the date of Maier's photograph, her subject has just come from the memorial service held for Mayor Washington after he tragically died in office.



Chicago, March 1980.

Frank's book *The Americans* had a defining impact on photography, including that by Winogrand, Arbus, and Friedlander shown in Szarkowski's 1967 exhibition at MoMA. Like the photography in that exhibition, all Frank's photographs for his book were gelatin-silver prints—that is, black-and-white photography. His view of America in the 1950s is monochromatic, shot on overcast days. The contrast between color and black-and-white is indicative of the difference between his sensibility and Maier's. Despite being roughly his age, she continued to photograph African Americans in later decades and in color, thereby creating a more inclusive view of American society. She was as much an outsider as Frank was when she started, but photographing over a longer span of history, she used color to create a more inclusively ambiguous—or maybe just two-minded—view of American society. This is the side of her work Sekula didn't appreciate when he compared her exclusively to Frank.

Maier was a self-invented polymath of a photographer who sometimes seems to have been working in one genre and at other times in a contrary one. That said, in both its essence and its complexity, her career—her essential genre—was street photography. She wasn't the sort of street photographer who could always count on her own invisibility when standing in front of a subject she was photographing. She relied more on making the subjects she offered to photograph feel flattered by her attention to them, even when her real interest in taking the picture was something she found odd about them, like the clashing patterns of the coats they were wearing (see [here](#)). Thus could a posed portrait turn into the classic visual “gotcha” characteristic of street photography.



Because her visibility when face-to-face with subjects limited the sort of photograph she could make, she developed the ability to make a revealing picture even, or perhaps especially, when her subjects were turned away from her. If she had a favorite subject she liked to sneak up on from behind, it was hairdos (see [here](#)). Another subject indicative of the comic mischief Maier could get up to in photographs made behind the subject's back is one of a workman rummaging in the back of a van so cluttered it creates the illusion he may have skewered himself on the business end of the long screwdriver that has poked a hole in his hip pocket (see [here](#)). It's a sight gag. That screwdriver seems to exemplify literally what Barthes meant by the term *punctum*.

As entertaining as such photographs may be, Maier also had an eye for more evocative, ambiguous subjects, like the image [above](#). On the one hand, there's something comical about the way the woman seems about to impale herself on the fire hydrant. On the other hand, the image is soulful: an elderly woman is burdened by the shopping bags she carries and her need to rest for a moment. The lighting gives this photograph, made at dusk, its predominantly melancholy mood. Other photographs like this one from the late 1970s convey a similar feeling, of subjects weighed down with a symbolic poignancy, which was an emotion Maier herself was experiencing by then.

Yet another aspect of this photograph that gives it its power is the fact that in both shape and color, the woman and the fire hydrant match each other. It's an amusing coincidence at first, but the more you look at the image, the more resonant it becomes. Though such pictures are most prominent in Maier's late work of the 1970s and 1980s, earlier examples crop up, as well. In the [following picture](#) from 1966, for example, a young woman stares into a trash can. Her posture—her attitude, as revealed in the way she addresses the trash can—mimics the can's battered shape, as she crosses her legs and bows her head. She and the trash can are performing a little pas de deux. This sort of formalism, through which the shapes in a photograph coincide or interlock to enrich the image's power, is a quality of certain works by Maier that break free of the aesthetic that predominates in an Arbus or Frank image.



Location unknown, June 1966.

This tendency shows how independent Maier was of whatever canons of photography history she may have read about, including what was politically correct in the polemics of aesthetics in postwar America. Her answer to all that might have been, to quote Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" The one advantage Maier gained from keeping her photography to herself was an exemption from contradiction and condescension. She didn't have to worry about either the orthodoxy or the approval of her peers. Perhaps when she was rummaging through trash cans, as she often did, looking for discarded magazines and newspapers, she was on a mission to rescue certain ideas about photography from the dustbin of history.

Making a dissent on Maier's behalf, I want to point to a side of her work that harks back to the prewar European aesthetic, which American post-World War II photography implicitly repudiated and explicitly replaced—specifically, the humanist work of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Consider, for instance, one of Maier's newsstand photographs [below](#). The clash between color and black-and-white in this image calls attention to the underlying relationship between the two. The colorful patterns in the woman's dress repeat horizontally, whereas the stack of monochromatic newspapers forms a vertical pattern of repetition. Despite the clash between the two, or maybe because of it, the dialectic between the patterns is what holds the picture together. Maier invited the viewer to see this continuity amid visual contrasts by aligning the hem of the woman's dress with the base of the stack of newspapers.

This sort of coherence underlying what at first seems like visual antithesis necessitates the sort of formalism mentioned earlier; thus do seemingly discordant elements reciprocate and reinforce each other to give the image its unity. Cartier-Bresson was the modernist master of this effect. His most famous picture is one from 1932, of a man trying to jump over the water flooding a courtyard behind the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris (see [here](#)). Everything in the picture is doubled, including the image of the man himself as his upside-down reflection in the water comes up to meet him the instant before he lands. Beyond all the other shapes mirrored in the water, even the dance posters on the wall behind him, which

mock his ungainliness with their gracefulness, were pasted up in duplicate side by side. This sort of graphic, abstract underpinning of a composition is seen in quite a few of Maier's best pictures.

A photograph of hers that has an almost identical formula, because of the way that both the shapes and colors of its two subjects mirror each other, is one made on the curb of a suburban street (see [here](#)). The shape of the woman's torso in a white turtleneck framed by her brown jacket is the same as that of the white fish on the brown backing that lies on the curb before her. Her distracted glance askance is accentuated, contrasting with the graphic balance of the planked fish. In another Maier photograph, the gestures are not the same. Still, the hand jive in which the two women, who seem to be identical twins wearing identical glasses, are engaging gives this picture the same quality of a mirror image that the woman and the fish have in the other photograph (see [here](#)). Photographs like these require the photographer to see double in a sense—to imagine the composition instantaneously as an abstract pattern while simultaneously capturing it as an actual event.



Location unknown, 1977–1978.



Henri Cartier-Bresson, Place de l'Europe, Gare Saint Lazare, Paris, 1932.

© *Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos.*



Location unknown, April 1981.



Location unknown, May 1977.

In some of Maier's photographs, we really do see abstraction and human action together, as if she were illustrating the different layers of consciousness that formalist photography of this sort requires. The

woman in the orange vest sits in the black chair under the orange-and-black painting ([above](#)). In another orange-and-black photograph, the man silhouetted in the foreground is the reverse of the shape of the Calder sculpture in the distance ([below](#)).

Cartier-Bresson also had a quick-wittedness that Maier could match at times—instances in which timing is everything. These compositions dazzle us with expressive gestures or shapes that would have been too fleeting for us to have seen them on our own. In the photograph [here](#), for example, the way that the hands in the lower part of the image and the fingers above them all go in opposite directions make the picture a balanced composition whose subject is an utter mystery; this discrepancy between art and content is what both compels and holds our attention. In the picture [here](#), the women's black coats fuse and turn the two of them into a single being, a misshapen creature in which youth and age are melded. It's a contrast embellished by the way that one of the children in tow has a silly grin on his face, while the other is bawling—the masks of comedy and tragedy as a commentary on the image Maier has made.



Location unknown, July 1979.





Chicago, 1977.

Cartier-Bresson was a master of capturing human frailty within perfectly formed compositions that somehow redeem their subjects, and his was an example that Maier could follow—and sometimes equal—along with the precedents that her own, contrary era might offer. She was a woman of many moods, and she lived a life with many phases. Maier was an elusive, fleeting figure in the history of photography who seems to have touched base coincidentally with many of the great figures of both her own time in America and the larger historical context of timeless photography. She was the “mystery woman” she said she was, the secret who sits in the middle and knows.

In this regard, her fate was in fact like Atget’s, despite the challenge of comparing the two of them. When Atget died in 1927, he would have been lost to posterity if the young American photographer Berenice Abbott hadn’t rescued his archive from the trash heap and saved it until MoMA took it in 1968—just as Maier would have been lost had John Maloof and others not rescued her legacy. Since Maier never acknowledged which predecessors in the history of photography might have interested her or influenced her own work, she left it to us, post facto, to suss out the precedents to which that work bears comparison. Aesthetically, hers was a career that might link her to many photographers in the pantheon, especially where her strongest genre, street photography, is concerned.



Eugène Atget, Boulevard de Strasbourg, 1912.

© The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY.

“Photography is editing,” Walker Evans said. But Maier never did take this crucial step with her own work, so far as we know. In a sense, she did take a first step toward editing when she decided which of the negatives shot with her Rolleiflex to print. But the color slides shot with a 35-millimeter camera that are the subject at hand are full rolls of Ektachrome positives in mounts, just as they came back from processing. It’s not certain that she ever even opened the boxes and saw the results herself. Though the lack of information about her preferences for one picture over another may limit our ability to judge her as an artist, in another way it gives us an advantage. By having to sort through all the pictures and all the different moods and self-contradictions they contain, we do get a more complex understanding of her as a human being. Since she died before any of us could question her about the work, our effort to cope with all of it compels a fuller understanding of who she was. It gives us our only chance to pose all those questions we never got to ask her.

—Colin Westerbeck



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, 1978.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, 1975.

Plates



Chicago, November 1977.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, October 1975.



Chicagoland, 1975.



Location and date unknown.



Location unknown, 1972.



Location unknown, 1979.



Chicagoland, November 1970.



Chicago, September 1975.



Chicagoland, November 1970.



Chicago, October 1976.



Chicago, December 1987.



Chicago, 1979.



Location unknown, 1979.



Chicagoland, October 1975.



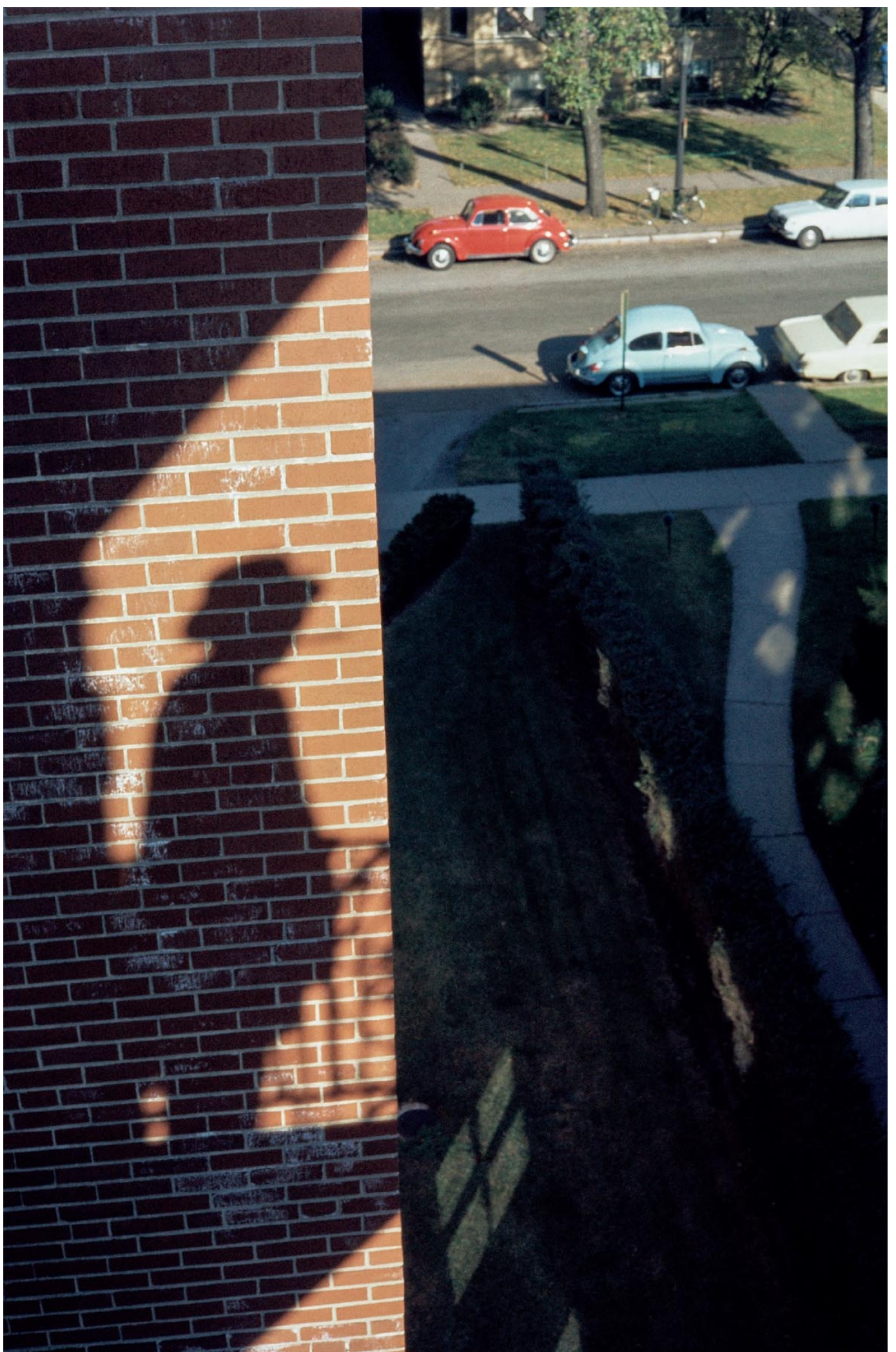
Self-portrait, location and date unknown.



Location unknown, 1975.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, date unknown.



Chicagoland, October 1975.



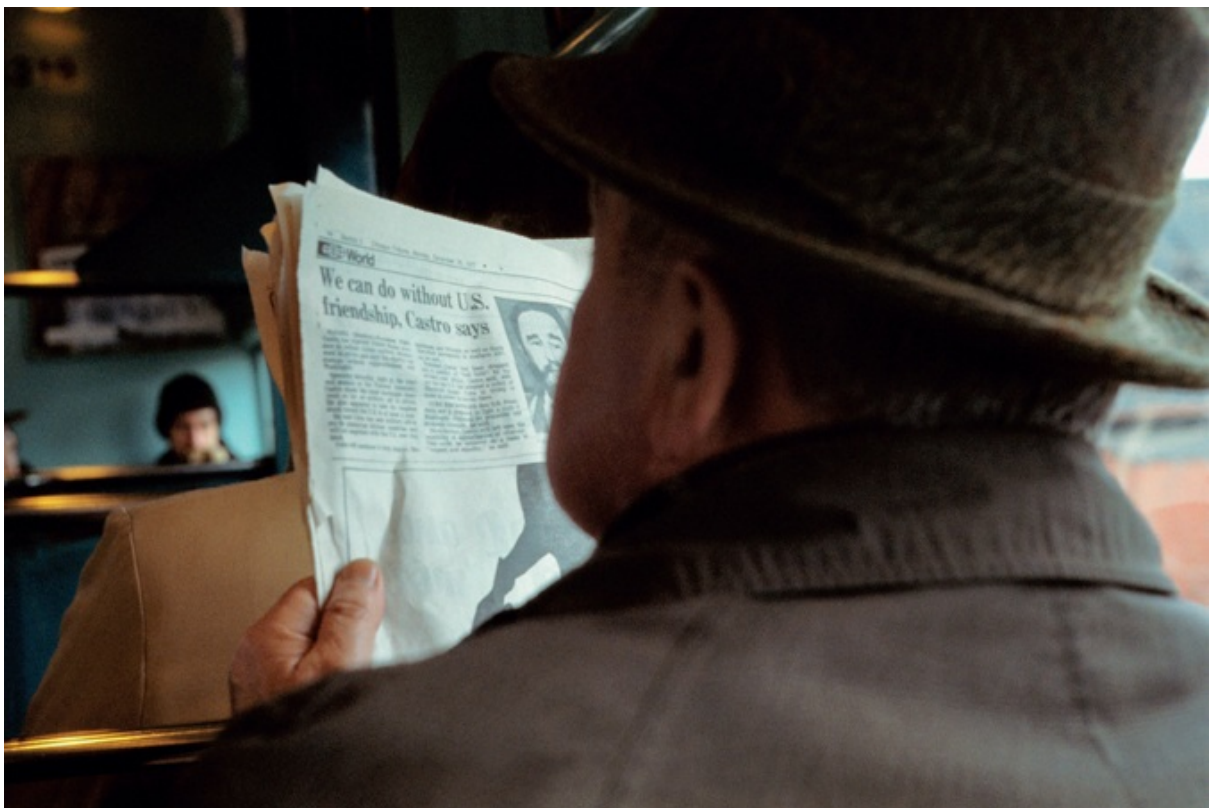
Location and date unknown.



Chicago, 1956.



Chicagoland, June 1976.



Chicagoland, January 1978.



Chicagoland, June 1978.



Chicagoland, 1976.



Chicagoland, March 1977.



Chicagoland, April 1977.



Chicagoland, June 1977.



Location unknown, c. 1960–1976.



Chicagoland, 1978.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, May 1977.



Chicagoland, July 1983.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, October 1977.



Chicago, July 1977.



Location unknown, c. 1965–1978.



Chicago, 1962.



Chicago, September 1978.



Chicago, September 1975.



Location unknown, May 1958.



Chicago, May 1975.



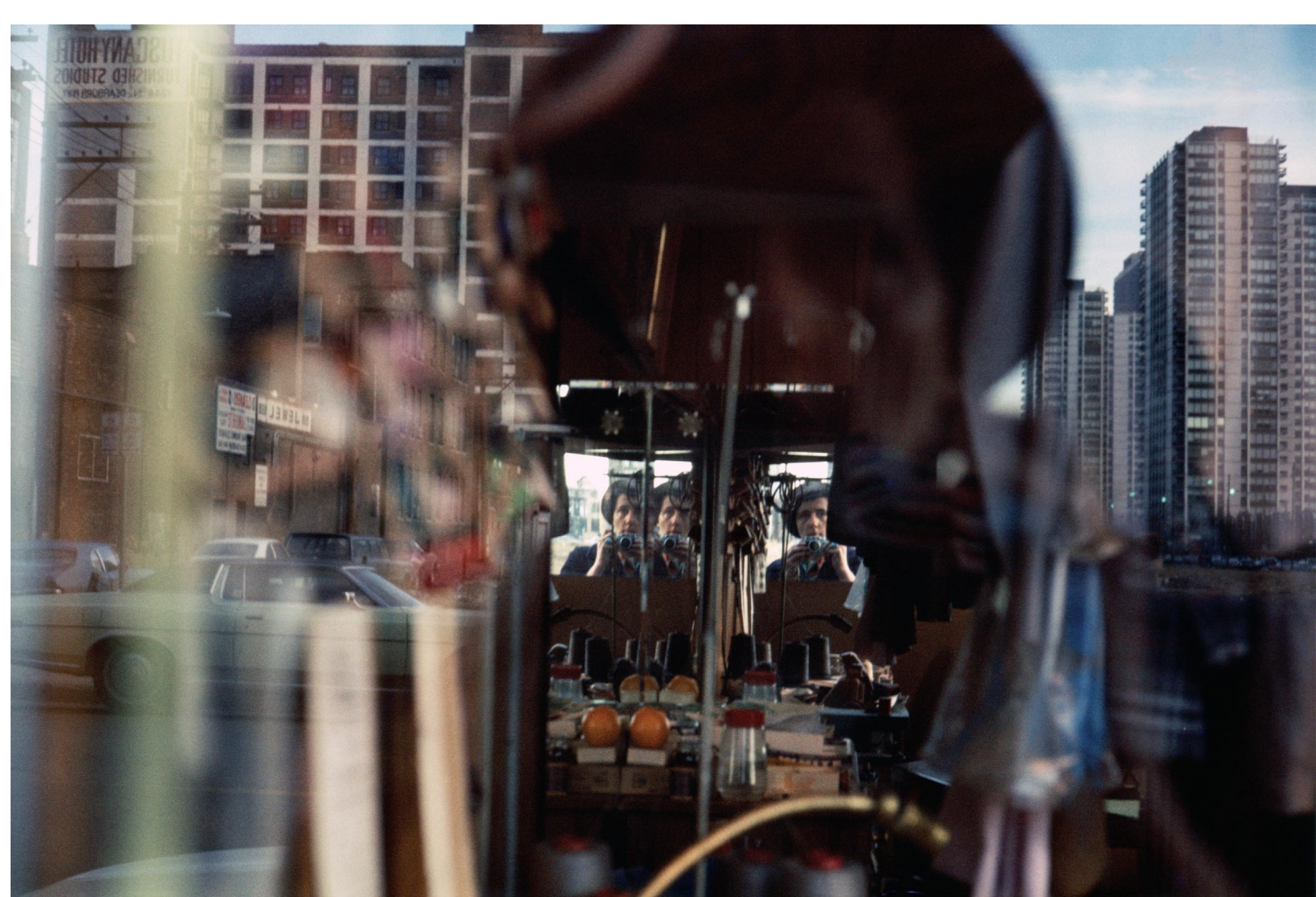
Chicago, date unknown.



Chicago, 1977.



Location and date unknown.



Self-portrait, Chicago, February 1976.



Chicago, 1979.



Location unknown, c. 1960–1976.



Chicago, 1979.



Chicago, October 1977.



Chicago, 1967.



Self-portrait, location unknown, 1961.



Location and date unknown.



Self-portrait, Chicago, July 1978.



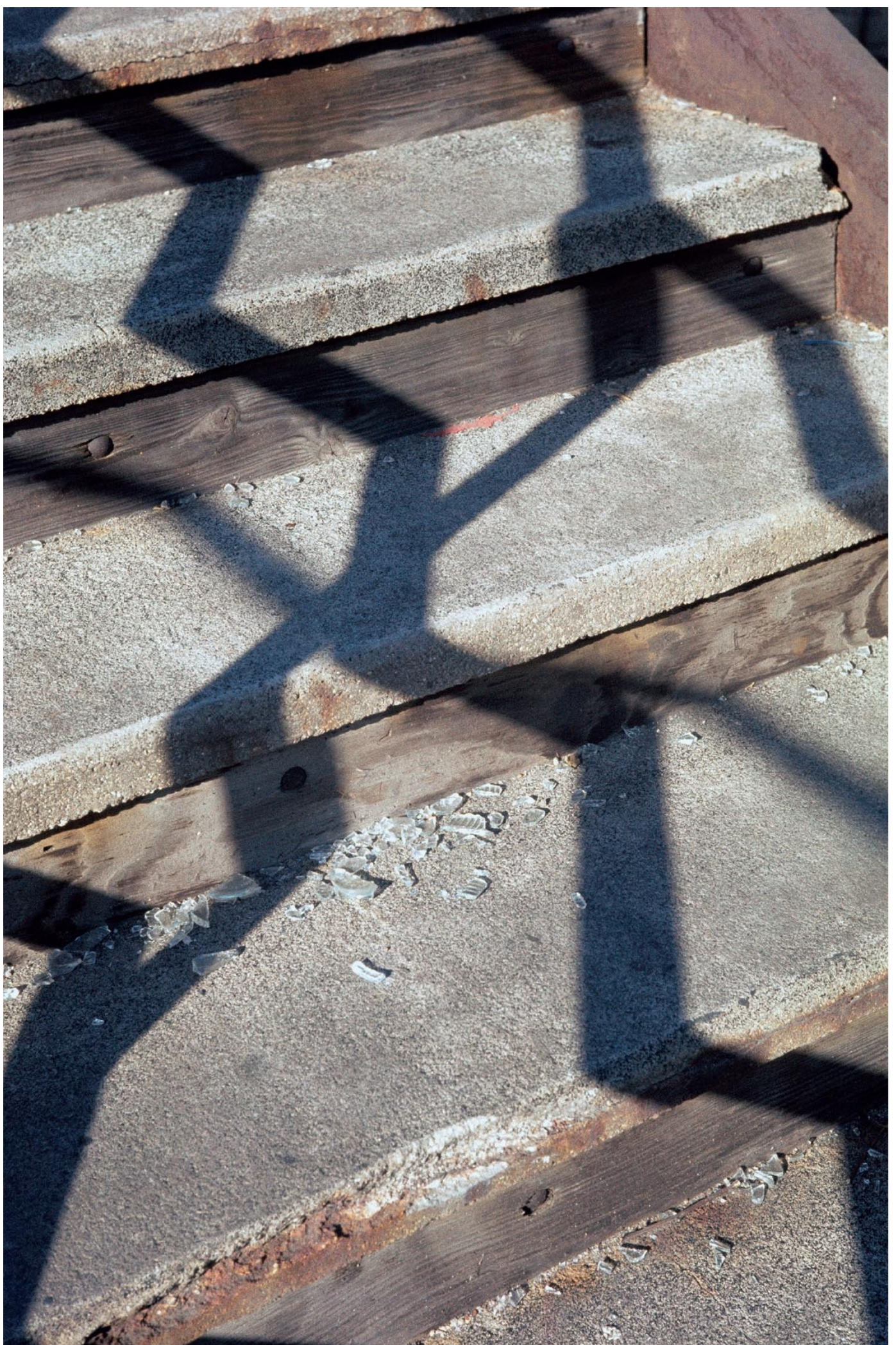
Chicagoland, July 1979.



Chicagoland, January 1976.



Chicagoland, 1976.



Chicagoland, December 1962.



Chicagoland, January 1977.



Location unknown, August 1978.



Chicagoland, October 1975.



Location and date unknown.



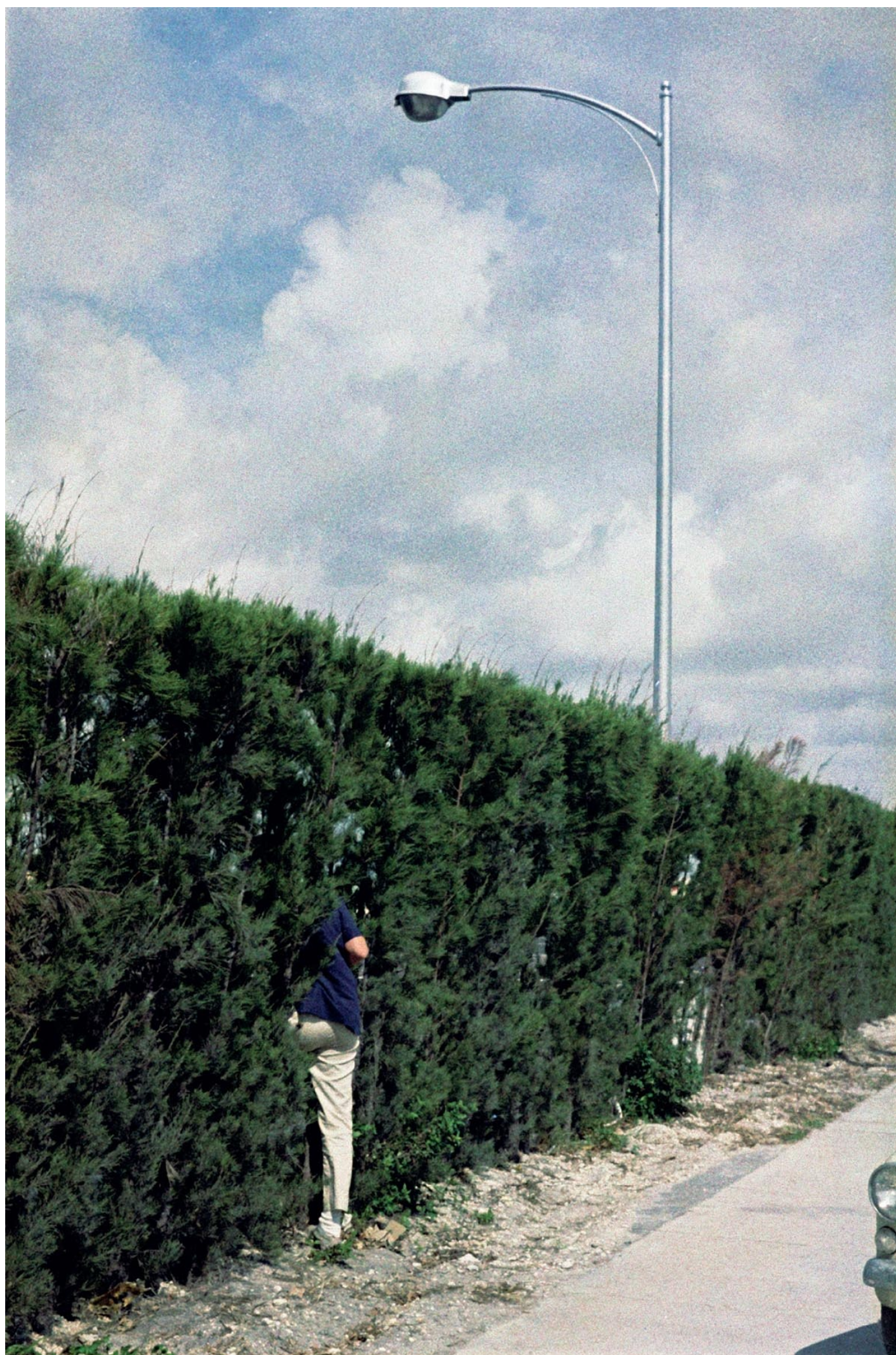
Location and date unknown.



Location and date unknown.



Location and date unknown.



Location and date unknown.



Chicagoland, May 1978.



Chicagoland, January 1978.



Location unknown, 1966.



Chicagoland, August 1966.



Chicagoland, 1972.



Chicagoland, August 1984.



Location and date unknown.



Chicago, April 1977.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, August 1980.



Chicagoland, October 1975.



Chicagoland, April 1967.



Chicago, April 1977.



New York City, 1959.



Location unknown, 1976.



Chicago, February 1976.



Chicago, 1978.



Location unknown, 1978.



Chicagoland, 1977.



Chicagoland, 1976.



Chicagoland, July 1975.



Chicago, December 1976.



Location unknown, 1960.



Chicago, April 1977.



Chicago, April 1976.



Chicago, April 1976.



Location unknown, March 1979.



Chicagoland, May 1975.



Chicago, 1962.



Location and date unknown.



Location unknown, 1960.



Chicago, 1956.



Chicagoland, November 1979.



Location unknown, 1960.



Chicago, 1976.



Location unknown, 1976.



Chicago, 1973.



Location and date unknown.



Chicagoland, August 1984.



Location unknown, 1975.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, June 1976.



Location and date unknown.



Chicago, 1960.



Chicago, December 1974.



Chicago, September 1965.



Chicagoland, February 1976.



Self-portrait, Chicago, January 1979.



Location unknown, August 1965.



Chicago, November 1976.



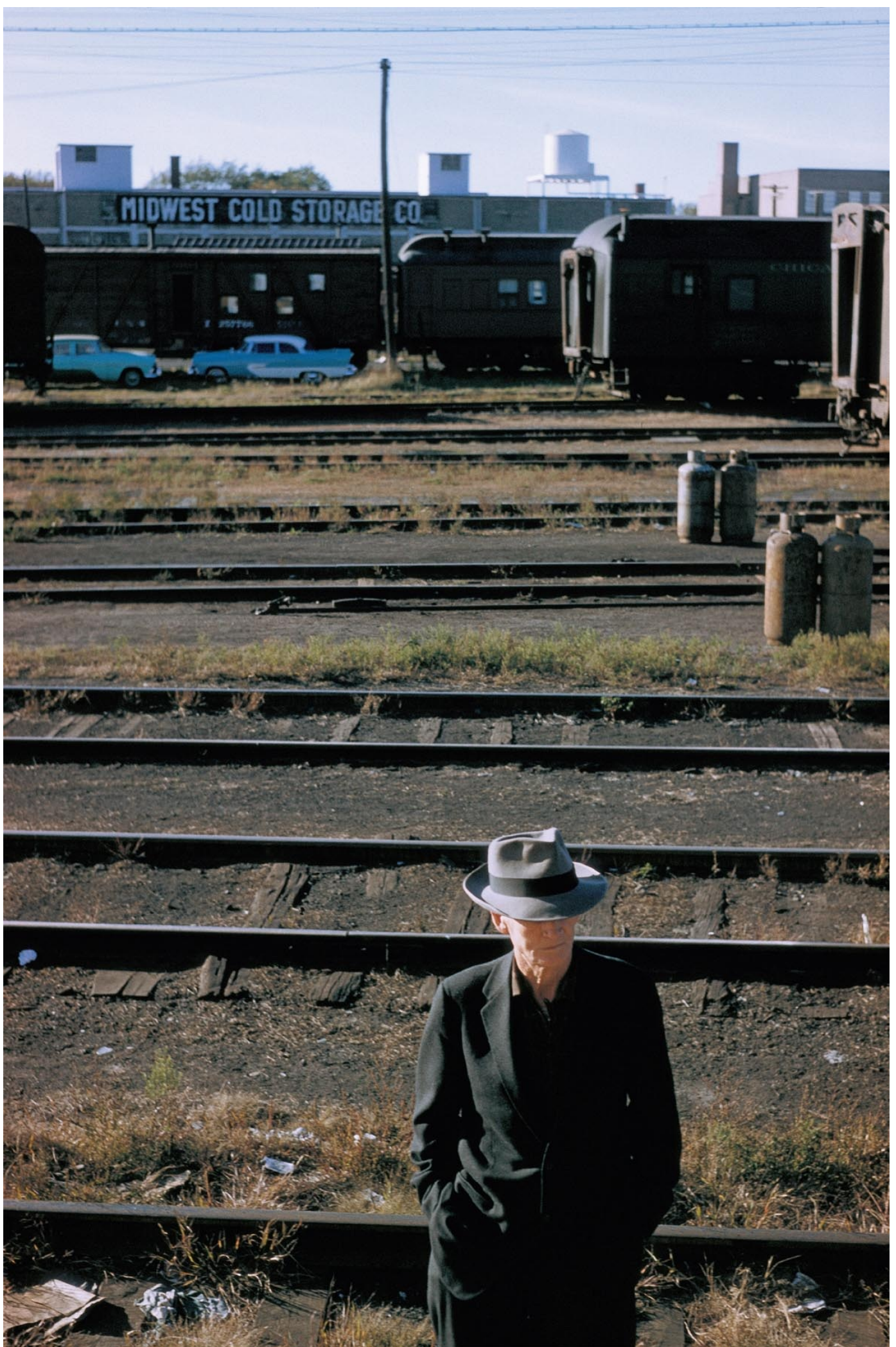
Chicago, 1977.



Chicago, 1977.



Keystone, South Dakota, June 1967.



Chicago, 1957.



Location unknown, 1959.



Location unknown, 1959.



Location unknown, 1959.



Location unknown, 1959.



Location and date unknown.



The Art Institute of Chicago, date unknown.



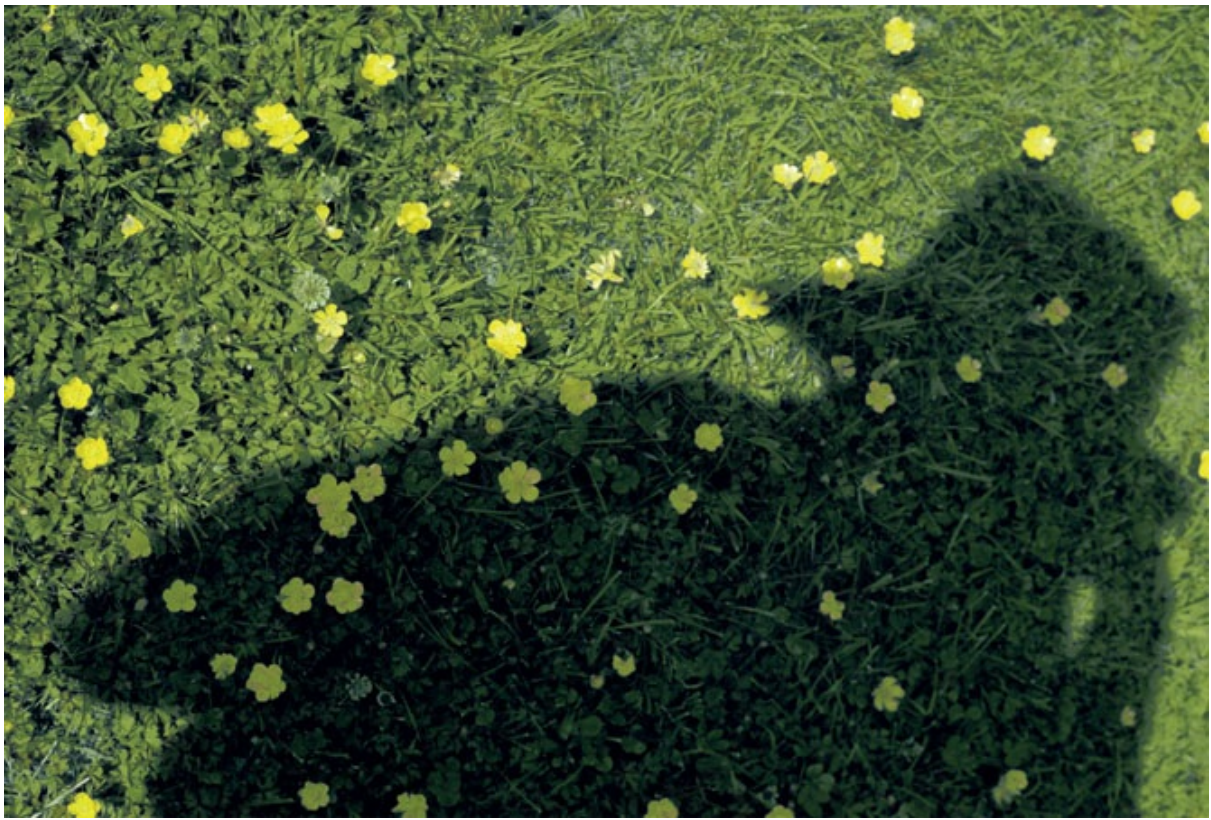
Chicago, 1979.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, 1975.



Chicago, 1975.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, 1975.



Location unknown, 1956.



Self-portrait, Chicagoland, date unknown.



Self-portrait, location unknown, c. 1952.



Self-portrait, location unknown, 1958.

Acknowledgments

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—Howard Greenberg

Notes

Robert Frost's poem "The Secret Sits": Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt, 1979), 362, first published as "Ring Around" in *Poetry*, 1936.

"I'm the mystery woman": Ann Marks, *Vivian Maier Developed: The Real Story of the Photographer Nanny* (Amazon Digital Services, 2017), Amazon Kindle location 155. This remark is also quoted in Richard Cahan and Michael Williams, *Vivian Maier: Out of the Shadows* (Chicago: CityFiles Press, 2012), 87. The narrative of Maier's life in the Marks biography overlaps the one in Cahan and Williams's in many ways, but Marks clarified the chronology of Maier's background and life by using genealogical records.

a couple of years after she died: In 2007, two years before Maier died, the storage facility where she had stashed her photography put her stored items up for public auction because she had stopped paying the bill. The most active of several people who bought the consigned lots was John Maloof. But his attempts to track her down were unavailing until he saw her death notice in the *Chicago Tribune* in 2009. The first monographic study of her photography career appeared in 2011, after which new monographs came out every year for the next three years. An account of the history of her reputation can be found in Cahan and Williams, *Vivian Maier: Out of the Shadows*, 283.

ancestral home in Saint-Julien: Pamela Bannos, *Vivian Maier: A Photographer's Life and Afterlife* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 14, 32, 39. See also Marks, *Vivian Maier Developed*, 58, 71.

Maier went to it twice: Marks, *Vivian Maier Developed*, 76, 96.

until nearly the end of her life: John Maloof, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 6, 2017.

Life Library of Photography: Bannos, *Vivian Maier: A Photographer's Life and Afterlife*, 55.

"piled her bedroom five feet deep": Cahan and Williams, *Vivian Maier, Out of the Shadows*, 86, 156, 262; Marks, *Vivian Maier Developed*, 139.

accumulated quite a collection: Ann Marks, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 10, 2017. Marvin Heiferman also affirms that Maier "assembled a library of thousands of books that included monographs on photographers ranging from Cecil Beaton to Thomas Struth." Marvin Heiferman, "Lost, Then Found: The Life and Photographic Work of Vivian Maier," in John Maloof, *Vivian Maier: A Photographer Found* (New York: Harper Design, 2014), 20.

“My life is in boxes”: Cahan and Williams, *Vivian Maier, Out of the Shadows*, 262.

a woman named Emilie Haugmard: For more information on Haugmard, see Marks, *Vivian Maier Developed*, 51; and Bannos, *Vivian Maier: A Photographer’s Life and Afterlife*, 114–15.

35-millimeter color work: Marks believes that Maier shot her last rolls of film in 1999, ten years before her death. Ann Marks, private communication with the author, September 7, 2017.

may suggest that she was a lesbian: Ann Marks also broaches this subject, obliquely, with her analysis of a photograph Maier made of a little girl whom Marks describes as “a potential metaphor for the photographer herself . . . part little girl, part grown man as she fronts a shop selling he-man gloves, wearing an oversized watch.” Marks, *Vivian Maier Developed*, 155.

Roland Barthes called a punctum: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 25–27, 43ff.

an open and inclusive and very fundamental idea: Cahan and Williams, *Vivian Maier, Out of the Shadows*, 40. Cahan clarified the source of Sekula’s remarks in an e-mail to the author, September 6, 2017. He explained that Sekula had written to him on June 10, 2012, with the answer he had given an Associated Press reporter who had asked him the year before about his comment that “Vivian Maier had a kind of social vision.”

“Do I contradict myself?”: Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” first published in 1855.

“Photography is editing”: The full quote reads as follows (emphasis added): “With the camera, it’s all or nothing. You either get what you’re after at once, or what you do has to be worthless. I don’t think the essence of photography has the hand in it so much. The essence is done very quietly with a flash of the mind, and with a machine. I think too that **photography is editing**, editing after the taking. After knowing what to take, you have to do the editing.” Walker Evans, 1971, PhotoQuotes.com, <http://www.photoquotes.com/showquotes.aspx?id=196#ixzz4uBYaFrix>.

About the Photographer

VIVIAN MAIER (1926–2009) was born in New York City, and spent forty years working as a nanny in Chicago. During her lifetime she shot more than one hundred thousand images, although her work remained unknown until it was discovered at an auction in Chicago by historian John Maloof. Her photographs have been exhibited in galleries and museums as well as featured in magazines and newspapers worldwide.

About the Contributors

JOHN MALOOF is an artist, historian, and collector. He discovered the first negatives of Vivian Maier's work in 2007 while compiling a book about the history of the Chicago neighborhood where he resided. He edited the first and second published collections of Maier's work, *Vivian Maier: Street Photographer* and *Vivian Maier: Self-Portraits*. He lives in Skokie, Illinois.

JOEL MEYEROWITZ is a street photographer in the tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank, although he works exclusively in color. As an early advocate, he became instrumental in changing the attitude toward color photography from one of resistance to nearly universal acceptance. His first book, *Cape Light*, is considered a classic work of color photography; he has published twenty-five other books including a two-volume retrospective, *Taking My Time*. A Guggenheim fellow, he is a recipient of both the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities awards. His work is in the collections of many prestigious museum collections worldwide. He lives in Italy and New York.

COLIN WESTERBECK is the author of numerous books on photography, including *Chuck Close: Photographer; A Democracy of Imagery*; and with Joel Meyerowitz, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography*. The former curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago and former director of the California Museum of Photography at the University of California, Riverside, he has written a weekly column on photography for the *Los Angeles Times* and is a frequent contributor to *Art in America*. He lives in Los Angeles.

HOWARD GREENBERG is one of the world's foremost photography gallerists. He is a leading authority on nineteenth- and twentieth-century photography, and has been an acknowledged leader of establishing its value on the fine art market. His gallery, the Howard Greenberg Gallery in New York City, is the primary representative of the work of Vivian Maier from the Maloof Collection.

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NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER: Vivian Maier did not title or date her images. For some of the images published in this book, specific dates are based upon notations that were written on the original envelopes and sleeves in which Maier stored her negatives. Approximate dates have been assigned to others. Identifying the locations where the photographs were made has been based upon visual evidence in the images themselves or inferred from records of Maier's work and travel history.

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Vivian Maier The Color Work

Colin Westerbeck

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